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From: Schmit, Ayn
Sent: Tue 8/11/2015 5:35:01 PM
Subject: FW: [WQ News] Confusion plagues EPA response to toxic Colorado mining spill it caused

From: wq-news@googlegroups.com [mailto:wq-news@googlegroups.com] **On Behalf Of** Loretta Lohman
Sent: Tuesday, August 11, 2015 10:52 AM
To: west-slope@googlegroups.com; wQ-news@googlegroups.com; David Sanderson; Roger Housechild; Corinne Housechild
Subject: [WQ News] Confusion plagues EPA response to toxic Colorado mining spill it caused

The Guardian

Confusion plagues EPA response to toxic Colorado mining spill it caused

Communities in Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona along the Animas and San Juan rivers struggle to make sense of mixed messages and a lack of communication from the federal agency



Nathan Shoutis paddles the discolored Animus river in Durango, Colorado, shortly after an EPA remediation project resulted in the breach of millions of gallons of toxic mining waste.
Photograph: Steve Fassbinder

Caty Enders in New York

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Six days after a burst plug shot 3m gallons of toxic mining waste from Gold King Mine into Colorado's Animas River, communities in three states are increasingly frustrated that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hasn't explained the environmental and health impacts of the spill.

“For whatever reason, their communications continue to be insufficient,” said Durango-based San Juan Citizens Alliance executive director Dan Olson. “They’re sowing more confusion in the community than they are resolving it.”

A slurry of mercury, arsenic and lead that continues to flow from the disused mine at 550 gallons per minute is expected to keep communities in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah from accessing water until at least 17 August, when the EPA says it hopes to have more information about what exactly is in it.



Durango copes with 'orange nastiness' of toxic sludge river pollution

The federal agency downplayed the short-term impacts on Sunday, when EPA toxicologist Deborah McKean was quoted as saying that the plume would not have “caused significant health effects” to animals. The federal agency is being blamed for the release, which happened during an attempt to clean up mining waste, and has yet to be explained by federal officials.

Olson responded that, while Durango wasn’t seeing immediate wildlife die-offs, the long-term health and environmental effects were impossible to assess: “What’s being reported is that there has been little to no discernible fish mortality. No one should extrapolate that there is no impact to fisheries. The reality is: no one knows what the impacts will be.”

As the plume of toxic water moved its way towards Lake Powell, at the mouth of the Colorado River, bewilderment as to how to interpret the dangers remained prominent.

video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faTNIWP3qaE>The toxic waste plume advancing down the Animas river

On Monday morning, residents of Bluff, Utah, reported a slight orange tint in the San Juan river, about 150 miles downriver from Durango. The Bureau of Land Management, however, had not closed the river to recreational boating, according to San Juan County community development planner Charlie Delorme.

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“Utah’s division of environmental quality is out sampling right now,” said Delorme, who noted that the small town of Bluff is highly dependent on tourism at this time of year. “We just don’t have hard numbers right now.”

Further downriver, officials at the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area had little information to offer visitors, other than to avoid the arm of the lake flowing from the mouth of the San Juan. That stretch of lake, as of Monday, was closed to fishing, swimming and boating until further notice.

Park ranger and public information officer Cynthia Sequanna said sediment from the toxic plume would hopefully settle in the delta at the entrance to Lake Powell, but that the short- and long-term impacts are unknown at this point. She was unable to say when the toxins might reach the lake. “I don’t know exactly where it’s at,” said Sequanna on Monday afternoon. “I believe it has reached Farmington.”

The city of Farmington, New Mexico, which received the first of the plume on Saturday morning, has now turned from bright orange to brown, and community leaders announced Sunday that a temporary water supply for residents would last 90 days.

Colorado’s Animas watershed has long suffered damage from 5,400 historic mining sites, 80 of which actively contribute substantial toxic metals. The river has a diminished fish population as a result.

The rivers further downstream, in New Mexico and Utah, however, were relatively pristine before the accident, according to Jen Pelz, of the conservation group Wildearth Guardians.

“The San Juan river actually has a lot of diversity and so does the Colorado River [even further downstream]. And I don’t think anyone knows how bad this can be,” said Pelz, who acts as the New Mexico non-profit’s Wild Rivers Program Director. “There are going to be impacts right now and there will probably be long-term impacts.”

I have heard two days of weeping from our elders: what if this problem persists? What if our river dies?

Many critics of the EPA’s response have pointed to the lack of cooperation between agencies in dealing with environmental fallout that will span at least three states and the sovereign Navajo Nation.

On Monday, EPA officials announced on a conference call that the organization was moving to address a lack of communication, setting up a command center to coordinate operations.

Joan Card, an adviser to the EPA, announced that no public water systems were affected in Utah and that a total of four were closed in Colorado and New Mexico.

As if to demonstrate the disorder plaguing the agency's response, Ron Curry, a New Mexico EPA administrator jumped in to correct Card, saying that five public water systems were closed in New Mexico alone.

Jared Blumenfeld, an EPA administrator covering the Navajo Nation Area, was unable to say what sort of impact the plume might have on Lake Powell. "We have received some calls from California," which draws water from the Colorado River, wondering if there will be impacts for the drought-stricken state. "We've reached out to the Bureau of Reclamation, who has jurisdiction over Lake Powell," and they are soon to begin testing, said Blumenfeld.

The EPA said that it still had not identified how many thousands of individuals or wells might have been affected.

At a somber crisis meeting of the Navajo Nation Council on Monday, delegates with their stetsons on the table aired their concerns. Representatives from tribal communities all along the San Juan river spoke of a new era, where water could not be taken for granted. They mentioned previous radioactive and heavy metal contamination from historic mining throughout their rivers. Some hinted at a reconsideration of the extensive corporate mining ventures contracted on their 27,000-square-mile territory.

Also at the meeting was New Mexico environment secretary, Ryan Flynn, who said he was prepared to help the Navajo Nation with their announced lawsuit against the EPA. "I'm willing to fight them, I plan to fight them – I promise, I will stand side by side with you," said Flynn, who said he was fed up with what he saw as deliberate misinformation from the federal agency. "The first summary of data they provided us was misleading," he noted, saying it was presented in a way that attempted to "spin" the truth.

Flynn said that he distrusted the EPA to the extent that the state is ordering its own water testing from the San Juan.

Tom Chee, a delegate from Shiprock, pleaded for cooperation from state representatives to answer immediate concerns about water shortages.

Chee pointed out that the Navajo Nation, which stretches across three states, was being told by the EPA to withhold water from livestock and crops in the midst of one of the hottest months of the year. "We're right in the middle of farm season, and we need answers as quickly as possible to say: this is the time to release the water," said Chee. "We'll worry about lawsuit later on. The real answer is how do we address the cries of our elders and get the water back to its normal use."

He urged that thoughts of a lawsuit should be put aside by tribal leaders while they focus on cooperation with other communities and the concerns of the people living along the river. "I think water transcends cultural barriers, language, belief systems," Chee said. "I have heard two days of weeping from our elders: what if this problem persists? What if our river dies? There goes our culture, our language. You cannot put monetary value on a way of life."

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